

PAPERS READ

BEFORE THE

LANCASTER COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 6, 1912.

“History herself, as seen in her own workshop.”

JOHN LANDIS, PAINTER

ARTHUR ARMSTRONG

MINUTES OF THE SEPTEMBER MEETING

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JOHN LANDIS, PAINTER.

The first of a series of historical papers bearing on early Lancaster portrait painters, as arranged for by a joint committee of the Lancaster County Historical Society and the Iris Club, which is planning for the portraiture exhibition in November, were submitted at the September meeting of the Historical Society by Mrs. M. N. Robinson and Mr. F. R. Diffenderffer. Mrs. Robinson's paper on "John Landis, Painter," is as follows:

The compilation of this paper was undertaken with many misgivings. Not the least obstacle in the way was an entire ignorance regarding the man in question. That, however, as research went on, ceased to be a dominating factor in the case; and by degrees the truth became evident, that while as an artist John Landis may not have been prominent among the painters who have at times dwelt within our county limits, his life may have afforded more of story and of interest than did the biography of others of greater reputation.

One of the oldest families in Lancaster county is that of Landis. The name is said to be of French origin. As early as 1717, three brothers, Benjamin, Felix and John, all Swiss Menonites, came to America and took up land in Lancaster county, then Chester. A grandson of Felix Landis settled in Dauphin county, and from him the subject of this paper is descended.

Henry Landis, the father of John,

was a farmer. According to his will, recorded in the Court House at Harrisburg (Book P, page 339) he was the father of twelve children, Jacob, Barbara, married to John Walters; Mary, married to George Hocker; Henry, John, Elizabeth, Anna, Samuel, Adam, Sarah, Ann and Joseph. The will is dated October 23, 1823, and was proved April 9, 1824.

The future "artist, poet and tourist," as he calls himself was born October 15, 1805, at the Engle place on the Middletown road, about one mile south of Hummelstown, and ten miles from Harrisburg. The farm was on the banks of the Swatara, and he speaks of himself as "hailing from the Cave Farm," Echo Cave being located on the place.

Very early in life he showed a marked talent for drawing and painting. Born of Lutheran parentage, his familiarity with the Bible suggested his fitness to study for the ministry. He finally decided to learn the printer's trade, and served out his apprenticeship with John Wyeth in 1822, who then printed the "Oracle of Dauphin." His fellow apprentices were the late Judge Murray and M. D. Holbrook. He was a lad of no ordinary ability, and very soon mastered his trade. He then became a partner in the only Jacksonian Democratic paper then published in Reading, and was a partner for six months, and then divided his time between York, Harrisburg and Lancaster until 1833.

His next venture was to open a lottery office, which he continued until the law was passed abolishing lotteries in this State, approved by Gov. Wolf March 1, 1833. It is said that at one time he won a prize of \$50,000. He went into the notary business and made considerable money, which he

managed to squander in various ways. He "studied for the medical profession," he says, "when I had a fortune of \$3,000 before the Fine Arts."

He began to paint in 1830. Naturally inclined that way, it was easy to induce him to follow his own inclinations. His becoming an artist is thus accounted for: "A traveling portrait painter came to Harrisburg and stopped at the hotel where Landis boarded. Learning that John had money, it was an easy matter for the painter to make him believe he was fitted for the profession—that he would become a Raphael in the course of time. John naturally became an artist in a very short time." He began with portrait painting, spent thousands of dollars in pursuing it, painted fourteen small single portraits, among them one of Mr. Chambers Dubbs, and one of Gen. Zachary Taylor. Of this last there is a funny story told. It was painted in the shop of a house painter, Cruikshank by name, with whom Landis was intimate, and from whom he bought his paints. A reception was to be given to Taylor at Coverly's Hotel, and Landis was very anxious to complete his picture in time. During his absence at dinner, Cruikshank, who knew something of painting himself, was dissatisfied with the eyes, and undertook to correct them. In his efforts to improve Landis' work he made the General cross-eyed. Landis never noticed what had been done, finished his portrait, and, at the reception, forced his way to Gen. Taylor's side, and proudly unrolled his achievement. Alas! the painting had been rolled up when wet, and the result can better be imagined than described.

Whether this misadventure was the cause of his abandoning portraiture

is hard to say. He began to paint historical and Biblical subjects. Of the latter were the "Resurrection" and "Christ Preaching and Healing Diseases." This last was destroyed when the Lutheran Church in Harrisburg was burned in 1838. His studio was filled with many square feet of pictured canvas. He painted "Washington at His Devotions," with the unfortunate effect of making the "Father of his Country" look as if his throat had been cut. Then came the "Battle of New Orleans," 14 by 22 feet, in the execution of which he says he risked his life "crossing the Susquehanna during an ice-flood, in mid-winter, to procure the portrait of Gen. Adair Senator from Kentucky," for it. He took the painting to England to exhibit it, but lost large sums in the enterprise. The English would not go to see it, because all the dead soldiers in the foreground were red-coats. He returned, exhibited it in the rotunda of the capital to induce the Senate to appropriate \$30,000 for its purchase. Col. W. A. Crabb had charge of the bill, and Mr. W. Grimshaw discovered the horse had five legs. This defeated the project. Mr. Landis corrected the error, but future applications failed. The painting cost him just \$53. He did not even send to Philadelphia for "artists' colors," when his friend Mr. Cruikshank could furnish him with everything he needed in that line. Of this painting he said that it was "the most wonderful and valuable, being unequalled on the earth." Other pictures of his were the "Resurrection," "the Head of John the Baptist" and "St. Peter's Release by an Angel."

In 1830 he had smallpox, and while lying abed with that disease he had a vision of the Lord, who called him

"Anointed," and commissioned him to preach, which he did after that period. When recovering from that disease he started from Harrisburg for Lancaster, and between the latter place and Columbia the wagon broke down, and Landis had an arm fractured.

Not content with painting, he aimed at distinction in letters. About 200 hymns came from his pen, a "Treatise on Poetry and Painting," the "Soul's Aid," "Heroic Poem, Life of the Messiah," and other effusions. Here is a specimen of his verse:

"Landis! great Poet Painter 'f the
time
By Pencil touches and in Rhyme;
Thy Poetic fire is displayed;
In Heaven's glory arrayed!
In Celestial Seraphic lay—
All glorious! like the noon day;
Mirac'ulous light and melody!
Commingling together sweetly."

In his early years he was inordinately fond of dress and excessively vain. On one occasion, attired in a new broadcloth suit, kid gloves, high silk hat and polished boots, a costly ring on his first finger, and sporting a handsome cane, he stepped up to a friend, exclaiming: "Say, don't I look like a Frenchman?" Pride, religion, and an unsuccessful love affair—the lady finally married a Mr. Weidler—unbalanced his mind.

Part of his life was spent in Lancaster, where he endeavored to sell his books. Among his works was one entitled "Discourses on the Depravity of the Human Family, Particularly Applied to These Times," 1839. One of his associates was the artist Peter Grosh, to whom he gave hints as to the mixing of colors.

In his capacity as tourist he visited England, and later on, as an "Oriental Tourist," he visited the Holy

Land. By this time his religious fervor had unbalanced his mind, and when within a few days' journey of Jerusalem he was found by a band of roving Bedouins on the desert, weary and footsore, suffering from fever. The Arabs soon noticed that Landis was of unsound mind, and, having a religious reverence for such unfortunate children of Allah, they carried him to Alexandria, from which point the American Consul returned him to the United States.

Despite the winning not only of his lottery prize, but of his "triumph over Du Solle and Geo. R. Graham in his *fi. fa.* suit for \$10,000, for libels, in 1845," he was very poor in the latter days of his erratic life. It is said by some that the world is willing to accept you at your own valuation of yourself. Considering himself "an artist of indubitable inspiration, by consequence of inspired poems and paintings," he, nevertheless, was "refused money and patronage and compelled often to live on dry bread and water." At one time he braided straw hats for a living in a smith shop he occupied in the vicinity of Chambersburg, and came near being burned to death by the straw catching fire while he was in bed one night.

In person John Landis was of ordinary height and weight, with pale, swarthy complexion, and dark, melancholy eyes. He was quiet and unoffending, never profane in his language, and abstained from drink and tobacco. In brief, he was a religious fanatic of the Dunker type, and wore a broadbrim hat, long surtout, long hair and beard and looked sanctimonious.

He was alive in 1851, but the date of his death, which is said to have occurred in an almshouse, is unknown.

In conclusion, it may be said that this paper is a compilation only. Much of it may be found in the early numbers of Dr. Egle's "Notes and Queries," and for some of the most interesting personal items I acknowledge my indebtedness to Prof. J. Aug. Beck, of Harrisburg.

ARTHUR ARMSTRONG.

One of the best-known names in the galaxy of artists who adorn the roll of Lancaster county's honored sons is that of Arthur Armstrong, portrait, landscape and historical painter. His is the distinction of being born, reared, educated and living his life among our people. He was born in Manor township, in the year 1798. His father's name was James Armstrong, and the family was related to General Armstrong, who was Secretary of War during President Madison's administration.

Unfortunately, few facts concerning his early life have come down to us, which seems all the more singular in the light of the after reputation he made for himself. His education was, no doubt, that which the local schools of that day could offer. That he was a very well informed and intelligent man the writer can testify, having seen and heard him frequently a year or two before his death. The earliest record of his artistic life that I have found dates back to about the year 1820, when, at the age of twenty-two years, he opened a studio in the borough of Marietta, where the late Judge John J. Liebhart became one of his students, acquiring no little proficiency in portrait painting, and one of whose efforts was a portrait of Gen. Simon Cameron, which has been highly spoken of. That, no doubt, was the place where his public career as an artist began. The eminent miniature painter, J. Henry Brown, was also one of Armstrong's pupils. Why he

preferred the country town to the capital city is left to conjecture. How long he remained in the river town and when he came to Lancaster is unknown.

The first contemporary notice we have of Mr. Armstrong dates back to December, 1849, which reads as follows: "We were very much gratified with a recent visit we paid to the gallery of Mr. Arthur Armstrong, in the Mechanics' Institute 'Mr. Armstrong, we believe, is a native of this city, and if talents of the highest order as an artist, combined with suavity of manners and an exceedingly accommodating disposition, deserve ample encouragement, then he is richly entitled to it at the hands of the public.

"His paintings—and his gallery is crnamented with some splendid productions from his pencil which exhibit taste, skill and production of the highest order of genius—are well worthy a visit from all of our citizens in town and country. We intend, when we have a little more leisure, to renew our visit, and take a note of his most celebrated paintings for publication. We hope that Mr. Armstrong will be liberally patronized as a native, and he is eminently deserving of it."

Alas for the good intentions set forth in the last sentence! Whether written by the editor or reporter of the "Intelligencer," the promise was never fulfilled. I hung on the trail until the period of Armstrong's death, but never an additional word was found.

How long Mr. Armstrong kept his studio in the Mechanics' Institute there are no present means of determining, but it could not have been for long, because a writer in the "Examiner" writes as follows: "Arthur Armstrong was born in Manor township,

and was long and well known to Lancastrians. He aspired high, built a fine studio of classical design on Orange street (on the north side, about half way between North Queen and Christian streets) and fitted up the second story as a gallery to exhibit paintings. We remember Hamlet and Ophelia and the Assassination of Caesar, which were works of great size; and he also had a large collection of engravings, which he took great pleasure in showing to a few select friends. He was a genial, kindly-hearted man, and had numerous pupils, some of whom speak kindly of him to this day."

As most people know, and as all can well understand, the portrait painter's profession in a small city at that day was neither well patronized nor profitable, and Mr. Armstrong was compelled to enter the lower forms of using the brush. As the eminent Benjamin West is said at one period of his career to have painted tavern signs and similar things to eke out his early needs, so, too, our friend Armstrong also resorted to these "pot boilers," and painted signs and made and gilded picture frames when more desirable patronage was not forthcoming.

That he did this lower class of work well may be taken for granted, but we have also strong testimony to the fact. In an appreciative, but all too meagre, biographical sketch of him in Harris' Biographical History of Lancaster County we find the following, which is copied from an unnamed "contemporary:" "It does not require a connoisseur in the fine arts to discover something remarkable in the style of Mr. Armstrong's paintings; he leaves nothing in the dark for the imagination to work out; it is bold and distinct, and yet the distance is

kept in such a natural harmony as to give it at once that ease and softness essential to the art. The picture (the one the contemporary describes) is one on rich blue silk, and is intended as a banner for the Washington Fire Company of Louisville, Kentucky. The back of the canvas represents the Washington family, which is not a mere convening of the bare material, but with a persevering assiduity the artist has left nothing unfinished. The scene is under the portico of the mansion at Mt. Vernon, and consists of the domestic family circle. In the distance is seen the Potomac, studded with sails. In short, the whole is beautifully worked out, and more worthy the gallery than the back of a banner. This splendid piece of workmanship reflects a character of no ordinary degree on its author, and it must be a source of gratification to himself as well as to his friends that the reputation he has gained by his late productions secures for him the patronage which his genius so richly merits. Mr. Armstrong is an eminent artist indeed."

But little is known of Mr. Armstrong's earlier years. It is not known who his preceptors were, but it is known to his family that for a time he was under instructions from a Philadelphia artist. That Mr. Armstrong enjoyed the confidence of his fellow-citizens is seen in the fact that when on July 8, 1829, the Mechanics' Society was organized, he was elected treasurer of the organization. He married Miss Harriet Wentz, of this city. His children were James T. Armstrong, also an artist, but who died comparatively young; Amanda Haldeman, Elizabeth Groff and Margaret Katherine Kerfoot. Two daughters, Helen and Harriett, died young.

Two of his daughters, the Misses Amanda Haldeman and Elizabeth Groff, survive, and their home at No. 406 North Duke street is filled with mementoes of their gifted father's art and labors. Elizabeth G., the younger of the daughters, seems to have inherited some of her father's genius, as several examples of her handiwork with the brush clearly show.

Arthur Armstrong died on June 18, 1851, at the comparatively early age of fifty-three years.

Mr. Armstrong seems to have been a prolific painter. A goodly number of his pictures are still in this locality, but many more were taken elsewhere. His surviving daughters still have on the walls of their home the following examples of his skill with the brush:

1. Portrait of his daughter, Amanda.
2. Portrait of his daughter, Elizabeth.
3. Portrait of his son, James.
4. Fine picture of his wife with her young daughters by her side.
5. Portrait of his daughter, Margaret Katharine, at a youthful age.
6. An excellent portrait of himself at mature manhood.
7. Portrait of himself at mere youthful period.
8. Portrait of Mrs. Margaret Haldeman, his sister-in-law.
9. Portrait of his daughter, Helen, who died young.
10. Portrait of his daughter, Harriet, who died young.
11. Portrait of Mrs. Thomas Wentz.
12. Portrait of Mrs. Catharine Wentz.
13. Fruit piece—peaches, grapes, watermelons, etc.
14. The entombment of Christ—five large figures on canvas, which is of large size, now owned by J. B. Lichity, of Lancaster.
15. Portrait of the late Mrs. Christian

Gast, owned by Mrs. Annie E. Martin.

- 16-17. Portraits of the late Emanuel Schaeffer and second wife, property of Miss Lou Herr, of Philadelphia.
18. Portrait of Mrs. Dr. John Levergood, owned by herself.
- 19-20. Edwin and Susan Schaeffer.
21. Portrait of Mrs. John Herr, owned by M. Louise Herr.
22. Portrait of Mrs. W. E. Heinitsh, owned by her daughter, Miss Margaret Heinitsh.
23. A portrait owned by Miss Susan C. Frazer, of Hon. William Frazer.
24. A portrait of James Jefferies, owned by Miss Susan Jefferies.
25. A portrait of Col. John W. Forney, owner unknown.
26. A portrait in oil of Michael Breneman.
27. A portrait in oil, on wooden panel, of Kitty Snyder.
28. A small portrait in oil, on wooden panel, of gentleman whose name is written on the back, but is undecipherable.
29. Picture of Fort McHenry.
30. Picture of two of W. E. Heinitsh's children.

The pictures 26, 27 and 28 are in the possession of Mr. John Breneman.

MINUTES OF SEPTEMBER MEETING.

Lancaster, Sept. 6, 1912.

The Lancaster County Historical Society resumed its monthly meetings this evening, when arrangements were made for the General Hand celebration, and the first of a series of papers on early Lancaster portrait painters was read. Mr. F. R. Diffenderffer presided in the absence of the president, Mr. George Steinman, while Miss Martha B. Clark was the secretary pro tem.

Miss Lottie M. Bausman, the librarian, presented a report of the donations received during the summer. The report was as follows:

Bound Volumes—The large and valuable donations from Mr. Edward Breneman (including a bookcase); "The Swedish Settlements On the Delaware," two volumes.

Unbound volumes, magazines and pamphlets—"Old Mercersburg"; Vols. I to V of the Pennsylvania German Society, from the Historical Society of Berks County; Annals of Iowa; American Catholic Historical Researches; American Catholic Historical Society; American Philosophical Society, two numbers; German-American Annals, two numbers; Penn Germania, two numbers; Schenectady County, N. Y., Historical Society; Linden Hall Echo; International Conciliation, two numbers; "Indian Graves on Bead Hill," Plymouth, Pa.; Sixteenth Annual Report of Carnegie Library, Pittsburgh; Bulletin of Car-

negie Library, two numbers; Bulletin of New York Public Library, three numbers; Bulletin of Grand Rapids Public Library, three numbers; lot of Confederate money (paper).

Miss Annie C. Grove, of Marietta, was elected to membership, and the name of Mrs. B. Frank Barr proposed.

Mr. H. Frank Eshleman presented a report of the part the society took in the "Old Home Week" celebration at Manheim, the report recommending that the papers read there by A. K. Hostetter on "General Heintzelman," and Dr. J. H. Sieling, on "Baron Stiegel," be published. The Chair was authorized to appoint a committee to take up the matter.

The first papers which were prepared at the request of the committee having charge of the portrait exhibit to be held in November at the Iris Club were written by Mrs. M. N. Robinson and Mr. F. R. Diefenderffer. Mrs. Robinson had as her subject "John Landis, Painter," while Mr. Diefenderffer's subject was "Arthur Armstrong," a portrait, landscape and historical painter, who was a native of Manor township. Both papers were ordered to be published in the society's pamphlet.

Mr. Hensel gave a report of the arrangements being made for the General Hand celebration at Williamson Park.

After a discussion on book purchases, the meeting adjourned.

